

Welcome, ladies and gentlemen. It's a pleasure to have you here tonight as we celebrate a new chapter in USAID's Nepal Transition Initiative program. For more than three years, USAID's NTI program has supported highly innovative projects to further Nepal's transition to a peaceful democracy. Working with the media has been central to this effort, particularly with FM radio stations.

In this time of political transition, radio has emerged as a quick and effective way to reach communities with accurate, timely information. Four out of five Nepalis have a radio in their homes. Radios are more common than televisions, mobile phones, or computers. Fifty percent of adults listen to radio every day and 80 percent listen every week. Most adults listen for nearly two hours a day.

If you travel around this beautiful land, you will hear radios in the bustle of Kathmandu neighborhoods as well as in the remote villages of the Himalayas and the Terai. Radio is the most democratic type of media – the poorest as well as the richest Nepalis have access to it. And, Nepalis trust their radios. Radio is the preferred source of information for politics and local events, with 82 percent of adults listening to national political news and 70 percent listening to local news.

Despite this reach, radio is relatively new to Nepal. According to legend, the first radio arrived in Nepal from England in 1929, with the elite listening to broadcasts from India. In 1950, Nepal's first radio station, Radio Nepal, was established. Until 1995, Radio Nepal was the only radio station to broadcast in Nepal. In recent years, however, the number of FM stations in Nepal has mushroomed. Today, nearly 200 FM radio stations broadcast daily.

USAID has played an important role in this expansion, particularly in remote and underserved areas. Through the NTI program, USAID has focused on strengthening the media, especially its radio partners. And through its creative programming, has helped to

- bring radio equipment to remote villages,
- increase the transmission strength of stations,
- and introduced new formats, such as live, call-in talk shows in local languages.

Let me share some highlights with you.

- As mentioned, since large areas of Nepal do not have regular access to any media, especially in remote mountains areas, NTI introduced doko radio, a complete studio and mobile broadcast station. As you know, a doko is a large bamboo basket used to carry firewood, food, and even trekkers' backpacks. In this case, each doko carried an FM radio transmitter, power supply, laptop, microphone and sound mixer to radio blind areas across Nepal. These portable radio stations allowed local communities to broadcast their own voices, in their own languages, thus connecting them to the larger peace process and building cohesion among themselves.

- USAID also supported the creation of Nepal's first live, nationwide, call-in radio show, Nepal Chautari, which is transmitted to more than 50 radio stations. Listeners call in on a toll free number to share their opinions and pose questions to elected and representative government officers, political and civil society leaders, opinion makers and national planners who are in the radio studio.

- Given the success of Nepal Chautari, USAID supported the development of live, call-in talk shows outside of Kathmandu. Through the weekly shows, citizens have been able to express grievances that, in all likelihood, would not have been heard otherwise, and in many cases, officials have been able to clarify misunderstandings about complex processes, such as land registration or local development.

- The shows have quickly proven effective in involving communities and resolving issues. For example, when the Saptakoshi River overflowed its banks on August 18, 2008, local government and disaster relief officials used the radio platform to channel information to flood victims in Sunsari District. The program also helped the district's public health officer to effectively inform displaced people of the government's relief efforts.

As we all know, radio is an intimate, personal form of communication. We listen in the morning while sipping a steaming cup of chiya or in the evening after the children are asleep. We gather both sustenance and solace from the radio ... listening for the latest political news, health information, sports scores, music, and stories from other lands.

Tonight, we are honored to have with us one of America's most talented, prolific, and celebrated radio producers ... Mr. Jay Allison. Mr. Allison is the creator and producer of the famous U.S. based National Public Radio series, This I Believe. Over the last 25 years he has won virtually every major media industry award for his productions and collaborations, including five Peabodys - a very old and prestigious honor in electronic media. Allison's essays have appeared in the New York Times Magazine and other publications. He has taught journalism and audio production around the United States and overseas.

Jay is also known for his lectures on citizen participation in public media and community-building through the power of shared story.

Storytelling is what brings Jay to Nepal. Last year, he cultivated a friendship with Madhu Acharya of the Antenna Foundation. In collaboration with USAID's NTI project, this relationship led to the creation, of Mero Jindagi, Mero Biswas or My Life, My Belief, Nepal's own version of This I Believe. Now, Jay and NTI are introducing a new chapter to radio programming in Nepal by using the ancient and universal art of storytelling. Jay is busy this week, leading three workshops for more than 50 Nepali radio journalists. Together, they will explore new ways to find and broadcast the stories of ordinary Nepalis to build bridges among individuals and communities. We hope these personal reflections will highlight the common traditions, hopes, and dreams that Nepalis hold dear as they move forward in the coming months to create a new government and a new country.

Ladies and gentleman, please welcome Mr. Jay Allison.

Dr. Kevin A. Rushing

Mission Director, USAID/Nepal